

Harmful Sexual Behaviours in children and young people

Introduction

With research suggesting that one-third of sexual offences are committed by young people under the age of 18, there is a growing need for churches and faith communities to think seriously about how to manage this complex and sensitive issue. The issue raises some immediate questions such as ‘Can a young person continue to play an active part in the youth group when we know their behaviour is harmful to others? Can the young person attend the annual youth camp for example and, if so, what measures can we put in place to protect everyone concerned?’

These questions have come through our Helpline on several occasions and we do understand the dilemmas and inherent risks involved when children and young people display sexually harmful behaviour. This leaflet seeks to enable workers and parents/carers to think through their response to these situations carefully and appropriately so as to ensure the safety of all in their care.

Many young people, particularly in their teenage years, try to seek out friendships in places where they can have a sense of belonging and positive role models. Churches are good at providing such role models, so it follows that churches can be uniquely positioned to provide that place, whether formally every week in a structured activity such as a youth group or informally at, for example, a drop-in centre or forum.

It, therefore, comes as no surprise that youth groups and children’s projects sometimes find themselves facing the unthinkable situation where a young person discloses that one of their peers has behaved sexually inappropriately towards them. Or, worse, that they have been seriously assaulted by them. If such an allegation is not handled sensitively and appropriate protocols not followed, a damaging and unnecessary spiral of events can occur. This could have a devastating impact upon the church, youth groups and all the individuals involved. And with the ever-expanding reach of technology and the internet, often with limited controls and safeguards, children and young people are exposed to a plethora of avenues to communicate and learn about the world around them, especially some of the riskiest and unhealthy experiences and lifestyles pervasive in society.

Understanding the issue

Defining harmful sexual behaviours. Harmful sexual behaviours are “one or more children engaging in sexual discussions or acts that are inappropriate for their age or stage of development. They can range from using sexually explicit words and

phrases to full penetrative sex with other children or adults.” In much the same way that adults abuse children both physically and online, children and young people can also engage in the same. Whilst there will inevitably be some parallels between the two it is crucial to remember that, in the case of children and young people, both the victim and the person causing harm are likely still to be developing - physically, emotionally, and spiritually. (NSPCC, 2016)

Some may consider that sexually inappropriate behaviour is a natural part of growing up, that it is simply experimentation and that the young person will grow out of it. Experience tells us that some will and some will not. Research suggests that where there is a concern, early intervention (and in most cases specialist intervention) is key to addressing the issue. It is vital therefore not to ignore the warning signs in the hope that the situation will go away. With growing dependence on technology and mobile devices our children and young people are further exposed to risks and abusive experiences in the online world.

According to the NSPCC (October 2016) ‘there have been growing incidents of online harmful sexual behaviour too which includes sexual acts using the internet or technology that are harmful to the young person and/or others (such as the use of extreme/illegal pornography including indecent images of children, online grooming and/or sexual solicitation of children and young people, and the sexual abuse of children and young people through images or chat - referred to as ‘sexting’ etc). These are classed as illegal sexual behaviours and there are clear abusive circumstances identified in which young people sext.’

What are the signs?

How can we know whether the behaviour of the young person is harmful? All children go through key stages of development but, very often, it can be difficult to work out what is appropriate and what is not.

What is age-appropriate sexual behaviour?

Pre-school children (0-5 years) Commonly:

- Use childish ‘sexual’ language to talk about body parts
- Ask how babies are made and where they come from
- Touch or rub their own genitals
- Show and look at private body parts

They rarely:

- Discuss sexual acts or use sexually explicit language
- Have physical sexual contact with other children
- Show adult-like sexual behaviour or knowledge

School-age children (6-12 years) Commonly:

- Ask questions about menstruation, pregnancy and sexual behaviour
- Experiment with other children, often during games, kissing, touching, showing and roleplaying e.g. mums and dads or doctors and nurses
- Masturbate in private

Older children in this age range are also more likely than preschool children to use sexual words and discuss sexual acts, particularly with their friends

They rarely:

- Masturbate in public
- Show adult-like sexual behaviour or knowledge

Adolescents (13-16 years) Commonly:

- Ask questions about relationships and sexual behaviour
- Use sexual language and talk about sexual acts between themselves
- Masturbate in private
- Experiment sexually with adolescents of similar age

1. About one-third of adolescents have sexual intercourse before the age of 16

They rarely:

- Masturbate in public
- Have sexual contact with much younger children or adults

This information came from ‘Stop it Now! UK & Ireland’

It can be difficult as parents, carers and youth workers to imagine and believe that children could possibly also abuse others. A calm but informed approach to this matter is extremely important. We need to make sure, no matter how uncomfortable we feel, that we work with and seek to understand the issues facing the young person about whom we have the concerns. They may well feel trapped in a situation that is out of their control. The sexually inappropriate and/ or offensive behaviours of a young person may well be shocking, but whatever the reason – and there could be many – a solely punitive approach will not address the situation or meet the needs of all those involved. It is important to remember that the child or young person presenting with these behaviours may well have been a victim of abuse themselves at some point.

The National Clinical Assessment and Treatment Service through their numerous assessments of children and young people (who have sexually offended) are of the view that there is a correlation between children/young people who have been

abused themselves who have then gone on to carry out similar abuse on their peers or those younger to them. Research carried out by Hackett et al. (2013) have identified that two-thirds of children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours had experienced some form of abuse or trauma themselves, with half of them having experienced sexual abuse. Research has identified that the age at which children display harmful sexual behaviour is observed to be as young as pre-adolescent children and not just adolescent young people. (NICE, 2016) If you do notice any of the signs mentioned above in your child or a child or young person that you work with, support or care for, or you are made aware of a serious offence committed by a child or young person, the section below gives some helpful tips on how you can respond.

As a parent:

1. Be willing to talk to someone who you think may be able to help or advise (teachers, senior youth leaders, Safeguarding Coordinator in your church or organisation etc).
2. You may want to consider speaking to your GP, a CAMHS professional who can help you develop a Support plan in addressing this issue. They will be able to advise you with referrals to specialist agencies who may be able to offer specific therapeutic services.
3. Be courageous to speak to your child with an honest but sensitive approach. It is important that you are calm, firm but also supportive at the same time. Explain that the behaviour is unacceptable but that you still love them and are willing to support them get the help they need to overcome it, as it is extremely hurtful behaviour. It can be quite a confusing experience for the young person themselves and it helps them to know that you are willing to listen to them, despite their confusion.
4. Be willing to accept help both for your child and also for yourself and the family so that you are all aware of what changes can be made by you as a family to be as supportive as possible to your child/young person.
5. Be willing to learn about the issue and how you can help, through accessing materials by The Lucy Faithful Foundation (who run two projects: StopItNow! and Parents Protect!), NSPCC (who also offer specialist therapeutic support to young people through their National Clinical Assessment and Treatment Service), Brook Young People (Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool).

As a church/organisation/group:

1. As a church, depending on the seriousness of the offence, consider the role of statutory authorities (i.e. police, children's social care or the local youth offending service) and declare one's interest in the case with the authorities based on the contact that the young person has had (and may continue to have) in the church. Written contracts detailing expected behaviours and

boundaries are often used with adults and could also be considered for the offending young person, with the knowledge of their parents. If this route is chosen, always ensure that any boundaries set are realistic and that regular meetings take place with all concerned in order to review the arrangements. Supervision of the young person will also need to be planned especially considering the layout of your church around toilet facilities, children's play area etc.

2. Sound practical and biblical teaching on sex and relationships is essential, as is having healthy role models and mentors who will not be afraid to challenge their young people's thinking in this area.
3. Make an effort as children and youth workers to keep up to date with changes and trends on young people's understanding and awareness of sexual issues, safety and well-being. Ensure that your church's Safeguarding policy reflects the same and acknowledges the need to develop partnerships and links with relevant authorities or agencies that can offer specialist support to children or young people struggling with these issues.

Disability and sexually inappropriate behaviours:

Disabled children and young people may be more vulnerable to abuse and may also present with sexually inappropriate behaviours themselves. When supporting disabled children/young people it is important to place it in context, whilst also keeping in mind their limitations with social communication and difficulties in understanding the feelings of others, when deciding on the appropriate response. To them, engaging in sexualised behaviours may be an exciting sensory experience, if not anything else.

However, the following questions would be worth considering in the light of safeguarding them:

1. What are the circumstances associated with the behaviour?
2. When and where were the first instances? What was the context?
3. Where and when is the target behaviour most evident? Is there a particular occasion or setting or activity or peer grouping which appears to give rise more than any other to the target behaviour?
4. What is the individual seeking to achieve, or to say, via the behaviour? Is there some stress or unhappiness associated with the current arrangements?
(Connor, J. 2007)

It is important to monitor such behaviours and accurately record observations and information associated with each incident to identify potential safeguarding concerns. Resources by the National Autistic Society and Respond will prove useful in addressing harmful sexual behaviours amongst disabled children and young people.

Sources

Connor, M. J (2007). ASD and Inappropriate (as perceived) Sexualised Behaviour

[Stop it now](#)

[The Lucy Faithfull Foundation](#)

[Respond](#)

[NSPCC](#)

[Brook](#)

[Parents Protect!](#)

[NICE](#)

[Barnardo's](#)